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AUTHOR Denison, N.
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ABSTRACT

A discussion of the preservation of minority group languages, especially when the group is very small, in a pluriglossic community focuses on the situation of German in Sauris, Italy. The arguments commonly advanced against total linguistic assimilation into the majority language group are examined. Implications in support of minority language rescue and preservation are then discussed. The following arguments are investigated: (1) minority languages are needed for communication; (2) pluriglosssia, and even multilingualism should be preserved for intellectual flexibility; (3) minority group distancing, even violence, will result from attempts at assimilation; (4) the affective needs of the minority language group will be unmet if the language is not preserved; and (5) language must not change. Assuming that language conservation is chosen, based on these arguments, the linguistic and planning consequences for Sauris German are examined. Considerations regarding codification and education in the minority language are discussed, with specific examples of orthography, syntax, and lexis in Sauris German used for illustration. (MSE)

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Twixt the Scylla of total assimilation and the Charybdis of suicidal purism.

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N. Denison

The topic of this paper is inspired by current trends towards conservation and recuperation measures in favour of threatened minority languages in pluriglossic communities. I have in mind really small communities ranging from a few hundred to a few thousand speakers, not the kind of community which is ever likely to be in a position to demand equality before the law for its language, or its use as a medium of higher education.

We cannot of course take it for granted that conservation measures are objectively desirable. The preservation of linguistic (or any other kind of cultural) diversity has not so far been shown unequivocally to contribute to the sum total of human well-being. Indeed, work on the negative correlation between the presence of many languages within a third world country and its economic developmental prospects suggests the opposite, if material considerations are to the fore in the computation of happiness. Moreover, diversity, if emphasised, can undeniably lead to ethnic conflict. On the other hand, there is no reason to believe that diversity must lead to conflict, or, more specifically, to violence; and if happiness is at any rate partially measurable in non-material terms, there is at least no evidence to suggest that well-being of this kind is diminished by pluriglossia.

The fact is that some members of some threatened minority speech communities are concerned to prevent the loss of their own special idiom, for whatever reasons, and they occasionally turn to linguists for help. Moreover, there are now more signs of concern among minority speech communities for the survival of their threatened varieties than was the case only a few decades ago. There is also somewhat more understanding and good-will among representatives of majority languages towards minority linguistic groups in their midst than hitherto, and

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this has in some cases led to an improvement in the financial means and the legal framework available to the latter for the preservation of their speech traditions. Here, a cynic might observe that minority concern is unfortunately seldom voiced with real force until it is too late, or almost so, and majority support (especially state action in the shape of publicly financed conservation programmes) rarely materialises until there is no longer any danger of an ethnic or political challenge from the minority culture, by which time its prospects of linguistic survival or recuperation are in any case slim.

Nevertheless, a linguist who finds himself approached for advice and/or help in such a situation is confronted, if he accepts, by a number of questions which he cannot answer with anything like certainty. Such is the interesting but difficult position in which the author of this paper currently finds himself, the specifics of which can best be summarised by recourse to the first person and the anecdotal:

For over twenty-five years I have investigated and described, as dispassionately as possible, the linguistic and sociolinguistic circumstances of Sauris in N.E. Italy - see e.g. Denison 1968, 1969, 1969a, 1971, 1977, 1979, 1980, 1981, 1984, 1985, 1986, 1987. Originally a German (S. Bavarian) linguistic island on Romance, more specifically Friulian, language territory in Carnia, it has undergone the integration of this whole area first into the Venetian, more recently into the Italian sphere and thereby into the realm of the Italian language. Whereas the grandparents' generation and their immediate forbears were turned by this process into fluent triglossic speakers of Sauris German, Friulian and Italian, children in Sauris these days, like children elsewhere in Italy, tend actively to acquire only a variety of standard Italian. This of course implies the immediately impending demise of local languages and dialects in Italy (as in many other parts of the world, unless the trend towards national standard monolingualism can be reversed). It has provoked a certain amount of reaction in Friuli in favour of preserving the local languages. Correspondingly, in Sauris, there is a move to rescue Sauris German.

I now find myself hauled down from my ivory tower and conscripted into a local action group who plan to have the idiom taught to their children in primary school. They require, in less than no time at all, a standard orthography, a dictionary, a grammar and texts for school use. It must be said in their favour that is only very recently that the necessary legal and financial prerequisites for such a development have become available.

Whilst I have the gravest doubts whether the educational and formalisational measures now envisaged will have any direct impact on the seemingly irreversible course of Sauris German towards extinction, I nevertheless feel obliged to respond to the appeal for help. And this brings us back face to face with the problems of principle and application which present themselves in this connection.

Perhaps the first general service one can perform is to attempt to sort out from the arguments commonly advanced against total linguistic assimilation those which on closer examination appear spurious or weak, and see what remains. Secondly, one can see what implications then emerge for the linguistic task of extraction, abstraction and codification to be undertaken in support of minority language rescue and recuperation..

We can only briefly summarise the discussion of arguments commonly advanced for conservation:

1) The appeal to straightforward communicative needs is largely spurious: major languages (like Italian in our specific instance) can take care of such purely informational needs as well or better, after the shedding of the minority variety or varieties, that is, after the completion of language replacement. However, if a minority variety is to be preserved on <u>other</u> grounds, the maintenance of communicational efficiency will be necessary, if speakers are to be persuaded to continue to acquire and transmit their minority code.

2) Arguments for minority language conservation are automatically arguments in favour of at least diglossia/pluriglossia (in the sense of functionally determined language alternation) in the minorities concerned, if not for full bilingualism/plurilingualism. No-one seriously advocates the complete economic, social and cultural isolation of minorities in the modern world which minority monolingualism would entail, in view of the notorious reluctance of majorities to add to their linguistic equipment minority languages of minimal prestige and usefulness.

Until recently this need of linguistic minorities to assume the burden of competence in the majority language in addition to competence in their own variety, tended to be accepted as an implicit cost item. A further disadvantage resulted, for, as bilinguals, linguistic minorities have been exposed to the traditional prejudice of the monolinguals, reinforced by investigations purporting to demonstrate in bilinguals deficits in areas such as psychic stability, loyalty to the state, intelligence quotients and, more recently, portraying them as "semilinguals" (this latter claim coming from would-be champions of linguistic minorities!).

In part offsetting this apparent negative balance against bilingualism there is now (in addition to counter-arguments on all the above points) some experimental evidence that plurilinguals do better than monolinguals on tests of cognitive flexibility - see e.g. Hornby 1977. However, since the assumption must be that the more separate and distinct the codes are, the greater the spin-off for this kind of flexibility will be, this argument applies better to plurilingualism involving languages structurally remote from each other than to varieties which through long contact in pluriglossia already show a greater or lesser degree of structural and semantic convergence (the degree of coincidence between Sorbian and German structure often referred to, or some of the varieties in Indian pluriglossia as described by Gumperz (e.g. 1971, 251ff.) are examples of extreme underlying convergence). If anything, the intellectual flexibility argument could be used to halt, and where still possible to reverse, such assimilatory trends; that is, it would be a point in favour of purism and the emphasising of structural and especially semantic distinctiveness.

3) Arguments based on group solidarity and distancing functions of minority varieties are legitimate if the values to be emphasised are seen as positive ones. That conflict and even violence can ensue requires no demonstration, but there is presumably no inevitability about such developments. How far greater linguistic distance of the minority from the majority variety implies a greater distancing of the culture and attitudes of speakers is unclear.

4) Appeals to emotive, affective and aesthetic needs are not a compelling reason for maintaining minority varieties, since the majority language can take over such functions - which it already performs for its monolingual speakers - subsequent to assimilation. Even where the claim is made that there are specific minority group needs of this order, there is no reason why they cannot be satisfied, after near-total linguistic assimilation, by the minor distinctive means which still persist (e.g. for the Welsh, by Welsh intonation in English, after Welsh as a language has been abandoned). This is therefore not a good argument against far-reaching linguistic assimilation, and no kind of argument for maximum structural distinctness or purism.

5) The soundest argument, finally, which speaks both for minority language conservation and for resistance to rapid assimilatory trends in linguistic substance and creativity - for a moderately purist position, that is - derives from historical-cultural considerations.

At this point it will be as well to spell out why the most extreme purist position is as fatal as the most extreme acceptance of assimilatory forces for the survival of a minority language variety. The second of these attitudes leads to the death of the minority variety through replacement by the majority variety both of its situational functions and of its linguistic substance. The first, the extreme purist attitude, amounts to an attempt to prevent a language from adapting itself to constantly changing reality - it is an attempt to freeze structure and use by absolute grammatical prescription. The fate of classical Latin is eloquent testimony to the outcome of such attempts.

The historical-cultural position argues for historical continuity in the minority variety as part of the general cultural and historical heritage of its speakers.

This can most realistically and enrichingly be understood within a compound ethnicity, containing other linguistic and cultural strands too, but linked with a clear determination not to surrender, in particular, the historical minority linguistic tradition which is not infrequently the chief identifying characteristic of members of the sub-group vis-â-vis non-members and towards each other. In other words, there are here elements of the group solidarity motivation and the emotive connotation mentioned above.

The argument in this form, however, makes no claim to superiority or even to parity vis-â-vis other languages or varieties; rather, it values the continuity of a distinct historical language tradition for its own sake, as an additional dimension to the life and identity of its speakers and a heightening of their sense of being the specific linguistic and cultural bearers of a unique tradition. It can also be seen as an enrichment for speakers of other language communities, as a contribution to the sheer diversity of existence, in particular to the diversity of linguistic realities, "windows on the world".

Assuming that the argument for language maintenance is accepted, what, very briefly, are the linguistic and planning consequences ? Here the situation in Sauris must serve as exemplification. Quite obviously, no specific claims can be made as to generalisability, though certain elements in the situation will be familiar to field workers from other language areas.

The task involved for Sauris German (SG) is, first of all, to codify the object of description, and this in turn means identifying and abstracting that part of the total SG linguistic repertoire which the village speech community feels to be its own unique possession vis-â-vis other strands of the repertoire to be labelled Friulian

or Italian, bearing in mind that SG has hitherto been the L-variety in Sauris triglossia, unwritten and unread by the majority of its speakers. I cannot here begin to discuss the theoretical and practical difficulties of this linguistic task. Suffice it to say that it is at this point that the linguist, even if he has previously felt uncomfortable about the performance/competence dichotomy, comes face to face with the full enormity of the task of codifying the structure of one "language" from a pluriglossic repertoire.

A maximally liberal approach would accept as SG all utterances in Sauris whose macro-syntax was non-Italian and non-Friulian, and then take this definition as the framework within which to codify micro-structure and lexis. A maximally restrictive approach would attempt to exclude from the micro-structure many of the elements which occur in SG texts but also in Friulian or Italian texts in Sauris.

Turning now to planning, my present attitude is that all efforts at codification and schooling will be to no avail unless this contributes to persuading those still capable of socialising children from birth in SG to continue to do so or to recommence doing so. And even then it may be too late.

Secondly, the codification of SG should proceed on mildly conservative rather than too liberal lines. Maximum detachment from Italian and Friulian should be the aim in the code, with the minimum achievable interference in parole. This principle should also apply to the orthography. Produce and teach a specifically SG model, but accept from children anything which can be deciphered (as hitherto)! Modern German should not be a source of etymological or orthographic convention, nor of innovation in structure or lexis, since modern standard German is not understood or spoken by most people in Sauris. SG was isolated from the main body long before present-day standard German began to emerge, and any subsequent influence has been negligible. Necessary new loans should be from Friulian and Italian, extant integrated loans from these sources should be retained, but sporadic borrowings should be reduced wherever possible.

Specifically SG structures in syntax, word-formation and semantic structure (including "idiom") should be preferred over alternatives which SG shares with Friulian and German. This should be so even where (especially where) the grandparents' SG version involves a more complicated rule than the Friulian or Italian influenced, "younger" alternative. There should be no sanctions - educational, social or otherwise - on failure to comply with this principle, but children should be encouraged to be interested in, and proud of, the idiosyncracies of their grandparents' SG vis-à-vis Friulian and Italian.

The problem is that totally laissez-faire attitudes to rapid structural assimilation in use militate against precisely that prestige of, and pride in, SG, which the introduction of SG in school is supposed to enhance, in order to encourage its renewed transmission to,acquisition by,and use amongst,children. Aggressive and extreme purist attitudes to SG, on the other hand, make acquisition (in part through voluntary participation in school classes) of SG seem an unnecessary (since "difficult") cultural luxury. Either extreme appears likely to contribute to the final extinction of SG. It is therefore between the Scylla of total assimilation and the Charybdis of suicidal purism that an enlightened linguistic policy for SG must steer. The appendix represents an attempt to put a little flesh on the bare bones of the ideas presented above by means of exemplification from the Sauris situation.

Appendix

a) Orthographic conventions and models. These are inextricably bound up with the uncovering and display of independent SG phonemic structure and pronunciation. We must ask for whom the task is to be undertaken and for what purpose. In our case the chief beneficiaries are the present (and hopefully the future) speakers of SG, not general linguists or Germanic scholars, and the purpose is school support for the preservation of a hitherto largely spoken tradition. Bridge-building to connect with other

standard orthographies or structures (German or Italian), though it is an incidental consideration for a few pedagogically interested members of the working group, cannot therefore be allowed to obscure the chief aim, which must be to enable the independent spoken structure of SG to be represented as directly as possible by written symbols and vice-versa.

In particular, attempts to render historical SG sound changes transparent by orthographic means are unnecessary, they obscure synchronic SG phonemic structure (see Denison 1986) and complicate sound-to-symbol and symbol-to-sound conversion. Hence bile [bi:le] - will, bar [bar] - bar, bosser [bɔsər] - water, hase [ha:ze] - hoarse, hose [hɔ:ze] - hare, house [houze] - stocking, ib(e)r [i:b(ə)r] - over, groas [grɔas] - big, greasser [grɛasər] - bigger, gros [grɔ:s] - grass, plant, greiser [greizər] - plants (and not, for example, wille/Wille, War(Bar), Wasser/Wåsser, häse (- hoarse) Hase/Håse (-hare), Hose (-stocking), über, groß, größer, Gras/Grås, Gräser. Similarly, vues [vuəs] - foot, viesse [viəse] - feet (and not Fuß or Wuß (!), Füße or Wüße); čurče [tʃurtʃe] - conifer cone (and not Tschurtsche, German style,or ciurcie/ciurce, Italian style - č is not totally unfamiliar to those SG speakers who have at least some experience of trying to read various written representations of Friulian).

Extreme innovative solutions tend to be rejected: hence ss vs. s is acceptable for [s] vs. [z] medially - where it has a tradition in local Italian and is known to a few from standard German - but not initially, where ss- is unacceptable to SG speakers. Therefore baissn [baisn] - whitewash - versus baisn [baɪzn] - direct, drive - but not ssel [sɛl] - that - versus sel [zɛl] - there. Likewise ssaldot for [sal'dɔ:t] - soldier-or ssan for [san] - Saint-are unacceptable.

b) Extraction of SG syntax

This is not an all-or-nothing issue. According to register, actual texts show sentence macro-structures ranging from marginally SG to totally SG: Code-extraction recommendations based on the relative purism principle would order the following phonetically transcribed

examples as follows, beginning with the least desirable (Romance features underlined):

də zeɪnt dis'pɔsti tsa mante'ne:ran də prɔ'pɔste 'valide - They are prepared to keep the offers open. (Better: də zeɪnt dis'pɔst tsa mante'ne:ran də prɔ'pɔstas 'valɪt. Better still, in the current state of domain specialisation, code-switch to Italian for this type of topic!).

də gru:pɔs vam pluətə zeɪnt net gɛən da'kɔrdɔ- The blood-groups didn't match. (Italian: I gruppi del sangue non andavano d'accordo. German: Die Blutgruppen haben sich nicht vertragen. SG also traditionally uses nominal compounds corresponding to Romance noun phrases such as gruppi del sangue - blood-groups - and is not lacking in compounds in which the first element is of relatively recent Romance origin, e.g. samöriakha:ze, dɛ'brɛakha:ze (two kinds of cheese), but more recently still Italian noun phrases tend to be rendered by SG noun phrases such as gru:pɔs vam pluətə. Compare the co-existence in Romance influenced English of the type blood-groups alongside the type bunch of flowers (German Blumenstrauß). Hence SG gru:pɔs vam pluətə should not be faulted on purist grounds. On the other hand the much used SG gɛən da'kɔrdɔ - to agree (Italian andare d'accordo) - can be replaced (and in the recorded text from which the example is taken actually was replaced in a subsequent formulation) by SG vi:nən- zɪ, which is etymologically referable to German sich finden but means "to get along with, to take (a liking) to". Hence də gru:pɔs vam pluətə ɔnt-zɪ net vu:nən is the syntactically (and lexically) preferable SG formulation.

Where there is some syntactic variation in SG but enough consistency in the usage of the oldest speakers to establish a clear principle (the linguist is also guided in this task by reference to historically closely related Austrian dialects), the considerations discussed above will lead to a recommendation that the already extant degree of consistency be elevated to the status of a grammatical rule. However, the precise form of the rule may require careful consideration and certain questions will be best left open, for future developments in usage to settle.

In particular one must beware of adopting rules from other varieties of German. For instance, the distribution of the prepositional forms af(-) and an(-) in SG is determined on morphological grounds alone, not in any way semantically conditioned, as in other forms of German (contrast standard German auf and an). For details see Denison 1977. Again, word order rules for SG need to be carefully formulated, with a sufficient degree of latitude to allow for variation in acceptable usage (acceptable, that is, to the "best" native speakers available). For SG word order, see Simon 1973.

The relation between the dynamic/static opposition and the case agreement for certain prepositions is relevant for SG as for related German dialects, and this is a point of structural difference vis-à-vis Italian and Friulian which requires pedagogical emphasis. However, certain fluctuations even in older SG usage may mean that modifications in rule formulation are necessary.
For instance, one good informant felt that in a poem written a generation ago, the formulation - addressed to a swallow (and here phonetically transcribed) - də pɪʃt khemen af maɪn zölder (acc.) - you have come on to my balcony - should rather read də pɪʃt khemen af maɪme zölder (dat.) - you are come on my balcony - because z ɪʃt ʃɔn do: (-it is already here)! For the present tense or for an imperative form with khemen - come - on the other hand, he would prefer the accusative! However it is clear that the accusative in such cases is never acceptable for static semantics with the relevant prepositions.

The oldest and most traditional living usage equally permits us to prescribe the static/dynamic differentiation between ga - to - and tsa, - at - with certain place-names, even though the youngest speakers have largely lost it.

On the other hand, where an adjective without an article follows a preposition which otherwise requires the dative case, most speakers now prefer a non-oblique adjectival form with neuters: hence mɪt vɑɪrɪgəs ʃmɔlts rather than mɪt vaɪrɪgəme ʃmɔltse - with hot butter, although the version with a definite article regularly receives dat.

agreement: mɪme vaɪrɪgn ʃmɔltse and although we have set phrases like pa ʃɛame to:ge - in broad daylight.

c) Lexis

It is impossible to discuss here in the necessary detail the theoretical and concrete issues involved. Nothing actually used by more than one SG speaker more than once in a macro-syntactically SG utterance can be excluded a priori. However, in general, SG lexis goes together with SG micro-syntax and SG idiomatic phraseology, so that a scale of desirability which highly values SG traditional lexis will at the same time give preference to the most distinctively SG idiom, favour traditional SG (even though only residual) productive devices (e.g. derivational suffixes) and thereby enhance morphological transparence, will prefer calques (where available) to straightforward loans and thereby facilitate morphological and syntactical integration (since unintegrated Romance items often occasion difficulties and limitations in this area). The following examples are listed with the least desirable variant first, alternatives in increasing order of desirability:

ɪnɔ'rantsa, ɪnɔrantɪkhat - stupidity, ill manners; bɛ'lɛtsa, ʃɛanɪkhat - beauty; fi'at, 'le:bər - liver; a:rs, trukhən - dry; fa'mɛa, hauslaɪt (vraɪntʃɔft) - family (relations); amitʃitsja, mi:gnʃɔft - friendship. in'dʒi:r/pal'ku:l ne:mən, pam'ɔrʒe ne:mən, 'ɔnvɛçtn - tease, make fun of.

z ɪʃt ɪnu:tɪl, z ɪʃt dɪbant, s tuət net nɔat/ z ɪʃt net vanɛatn - it is unnecessary/useless.

ɪ pɪn dɛl sɛ'tanta'trɛ, ɪ ɔn vɪntsən jo:r - I am 15 years old.

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